

Meller's Duck, Africa's forgotten Mallard

H. Glyn Young

Meller's Duck *Anas melleri*, a Madagascan endemic, was described in 1864 from specimens sent back to London from Madagascar by botanist Christopher Meller^{9,10}. Meller, however, had mistaken his find for the more widespread, and surprisingly dissimilar, Red-billed Duck *A. erythrorhyncha*. This mistake proved to be only the first in a series of misunderstandings that have left this dabbling-duck one of Africa's forgotten birds.



Two male Meller's Duck *Anas melleri* (H. Glyn Young)

A superficial resemblance to the females of the Mallard *A. platyrhynchos*, and the apparent willingness of some captive birds to hybridise with more colourful relatives, led some very eminent scientists to consider Meller's Duck to be a recent, island isolate of the migratory Mallard^{3,12}. This theory appears to originate with Konrad Lorenz, who observed behaviour and hybridisation, among his own captive-reared birds⁶. The behaviour of Lorenz's birds was considered to represent a classic scenario of innate releaser responses – the strong colours of male Mallards – stimulating the responses of female Meller's Duck more strongly than the dull plumage of her own male. Meller's Duck has never been studied in the wild. However, there have been extensive behavioural studies on a large captive population that has never shown any interest in hybridising with any other duck species, even when kept at liberty.^{14,15} These studies have complimented those of comparative morphology and genetics (J. Rhymer in litt) of related dabbling ducks, and suggest that Meller's Duck is a distinct species, and, while undoubtedly a member of the mallard group, it is not an island form of the Mallard.⁵ The most obvious differences between Meller's Duck and Mal-

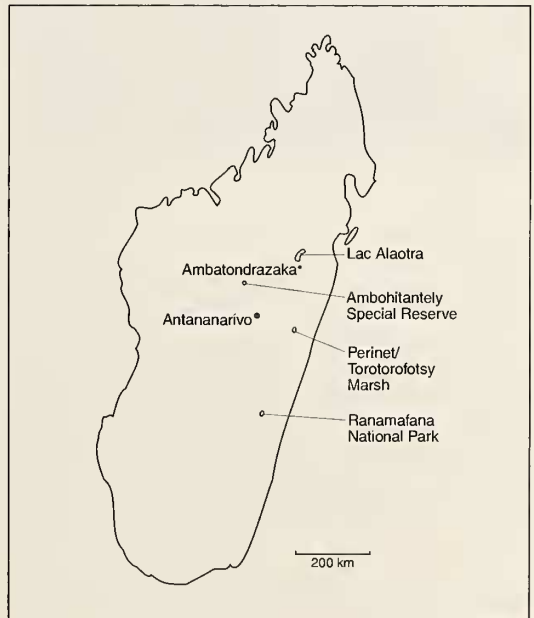
lard are in reproductive biology, the Madagascan species has no down-up display and has a significantly longer grunt-whistle and head-up-tail-up display.¹⁴

Distribution and status

Meller's Duck is endemic to Madagascar and widespread in the central and eastern regions of the island, inhabiting permanent wetlands, lakes, rivers, streams and forest ponds from sea level to 2,000 m.⁴ The largest concentrations, including flocks of up to 260, have been recorded at Lac Alaotra (Map 1) where ducks are present throughout the year. Smaller numbers have been recorded at many central and eastern wetlands.

Breeding on the eastern slopes of the Central Plateau, including Alaotra, probably follows the onset of the rainy season (November–January at Alaotra). Ducks become very dispersive following breeding, and have been recorded at many unlikely sites including the west coast of Madagascar, and lakes in the centre of the capital city, Antananarivo.

A small, almost certainly introduced population of Meller's Duck inhabits the neighbouring Indian Ocean island of Mauritius. The origins of this population are



Map 1

unclear, but Meinertzhagen dated the introduction at around 1850.⁷

The population in Madagascar has declined in recent years through indiscriminate subsistence hunting, habitat modification and pollution of wetlands throughout the range.¹⁶ In Mauritius, Meller's Duck is close to extinction, probably only surviving through the release of captive-bred birds.⁸ It is listed as Near Threatened and continuing decline in numbers combined with possible further agricultural development at Alaotra will push Meller's Duck towards extinction.¹

Origins and taxonomy

A. melleri is one of 14 species of mallard, a group of medium-sized dabbling ducks, although the exact relationship with the other species is not clear. It has been linked with the African Yellow-billed Duck *A. undulata*, these two species constituting the infragenus *Afranus*.⁵ There are also strong behavioural similarities with the African Black Duck *A. sparsa*, eg lack of down-up display, marked territoriality during the breeding season and strong pair-bonds. Similarities between these two species, however, probably result from convergence.



Male Meller's Duck *Anas melleri*, 1995 (H. Glyn Young)

Identification

Meller's Duck is a 65 cm long, uniformly dark brown, surface-feeding duck. The sexes are similar. There is no supercilium, the long bill is blue-grey with a dark nail, and appears to be longer in males than females as males have larger skulls.¹³ The speculum is dark green, bordered with white, and the pale underwings contrast with the dark body in flight. Calls are similar to other mallards, males utter a soft *raeb-raeb-raeb*, females a harsh quack.

There should be no confusion with other duck species in Madagascar, where the size, uniform plumage and long bill of Meller's Duck are distinctive. In Mauritius, Mallard has been introduced in recent years,

although the female of this species has a shorter, less uniformly coloured bill and an obvious supercilium.



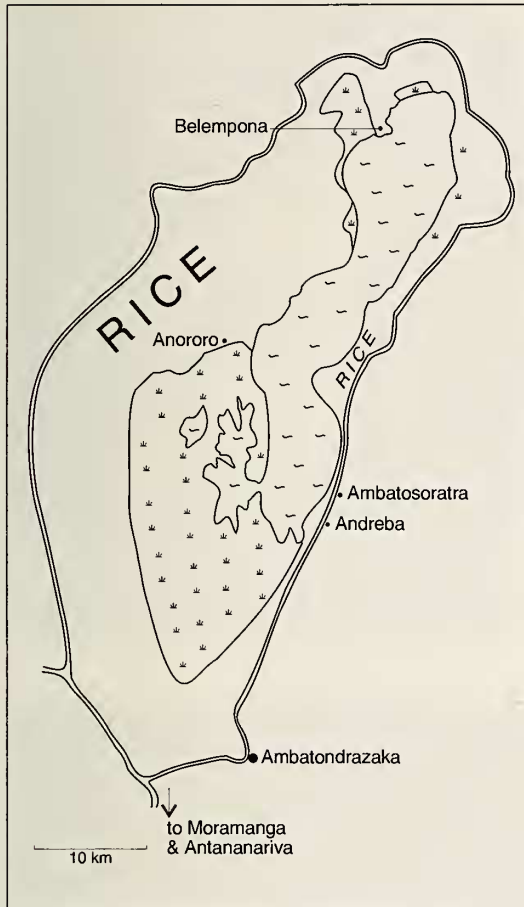
Female Meller's Duck *Anas melleri* (H. Glyn Young)

Where to see Meller's Duck

Dispersive habits make it possible to see Meller's Duck on almost any wetland on the eastern Central Plateau and eastern region of Madagascar. Visiting birders regularly see the species at Lac Ivato (near the international airport), Lac Alarobia (a privately owned and protected lake in Antananarivo), at Perinet and at the nearby Torotorofotsy Marsh. It has also been recorded at Ambohitantely Special Reserve and Ranamafana National Park (map 1).

To see the species well, and possibly in large numbers, Lac Alaotra must be visited. The largest lake in Madagascar, it can be reached by plane or taxi-brousse from Antananarivo and there is also a direct rail link, although this has become erratic in recent years. Accommodation and travel around the lake can be arranged from the main town, Ambatondrazaka, which boasts several small and hospitable hotels, shops and a good market. The lakeside villages of Andreba in the east, or Anororo in the west (map 2) should be used as bases, while the extensive marsh at the lake's southern end can be explored in dug-out canoes (pirogues). Local fishermen, the pirogue owners, can be hired, as guides, and are vital to propel and keep the pirogues afloat. There are many wetland birds in this increasingly degraded marsh, which so excited Jean Delacour in the 1920s.² Delacour's Grebe *Tachybaptus rufolavatus* and the Madagascar Pochard *Aythya innotata*, considered virtually endemic to Alaotra, are, however, possibly now extinct. The rare Alaotra Gentle Lemur *Haplolemur griseus alaotrensis*, the world's only reed-eating primate, can often be seen from the pirogue while in the marsh.

Meller's Ducks may also be seen from the road around Alaotra at dawn and dusk as they fly to roost or



Map 2. Lac Alaotra (from Young and Smith, 1989)

forage in rice paddies. It is now unfortunately very difficult to see this species in Mauritius, the best site used to be the reservoir at Valetta.

Acknowledgements

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